

The New Imperialism

From a world history perspective, the most noticeable trend in the history of the late 19th century was the domination of Europeans over Non-Europeans. This domination took many forms ranging from economic penetration to outright annexation. No area of the globe, however remote from Europe, was free of European merchants, adventurers, explorers or western missionaries. Was colonialism good for either the imperialist or the peoples of the globe who found themselves subjects of one empire or another? A few decades ago, the answer would have been a resounding no. Now, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the more or less widespread discrediting of Marxist and Leninist analysis, and the end of the Cold War, political scientists and historians seem willing to take a more positive look at Nineteenth Century Imperialism.

One noted current historian, Niall Ferguson has argued that the British Empire probably accomplished more positive good for the world than the last generation of historians, poisoned by Marxism, could or would concede. Ferguson has argued that the British Empire was a “liberal” empire that upheld international law, kept the seas open and free, and ultimately benefited everyone by ensuring the free flow of trade. In other words, Ferguson would find little reason to contradict the young Winston Churchill’s assertion that the aim of British imperialism was to:

give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains off the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to place the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain. **(Ikenberry, p. 149)**

It should come as no surprise that Ferguson regards the United States current position in the world as the natural successor to the British Empire and that the greatest danger the U.S. represents is that the world will not get enough American Imperialism because U.S. leaders often have short attention spans and tend to pull back troops when intervention becomes unpopular. It will be very interesting to check back into the debate on Imperialism about ten years from now and see how Niall Ferguson’s point of view has fared!

The other great school of thought about Imperialism is, of course, Marxist. For example, Marxist historians like E.J. Hobsbawm argue that if we look at the 19th century as a great competition for the world's wealth and resources, there were clear winners and losers. Among the winners were the British, French, Americans, and Japanese—all successful colonizers. Among the losers were Punjabis, Zulus, Chinese, Egyptians, Crow, Sioux and hundreds of other Non-European tribes and ethnic groups. **(Hobsbawm, Age of Empire)**

There are a couple of generalizations that need to be said about this process of European expansion:

1. *Much of it occurs during the last 30 years of the 19th century—it is during the years 1870 to 1900 that much of Africa and Asia falls under the direct control of one European power or another. It should be remembered that the United States, in this context, is clearly an economic and cultural outpost of Europe. Americans are enthusiastic players in the Imperial sweepstakes; for the most part, at the expense of Spain. (Hence the term New Imperialism!).*

2. *This whole period of colonialism and empire building is very intense but brief—for example the whole period of acquiring colonies, exploiting colonies, and finally de-colonization roughly falls into one human lifetime: Winston Churchill, the noted British Imperialist I quoted was born in 1870 and died in 1962. He grew to adulthood during the height of the Imperialist craze, fought as a young man in the Sudan and South Africa, and lived to supervise the dismantling of the British Empire.*

The Great Debate

Given the later popularity of colonial expansion, it is surprising to see just how futile colonies seemed before 1850. For example, Adam Smith had argued that the burdens of colonialism outweighed its alleged benefits; liberal reformers favored laissez faire economics and colonies tied to the mother country did not seem to fit the model of global free trade. The liberal party leader William Gladstone expected the whole British Empire to dissolve in the end, and in 1852 Benjamin Disraeli, who agreed with Gladstone in little else, made his famous declaration that *“These wretched colonies will all be independent in a few years and are millstones around our necks.”* The experience of the Spanish in the Western Hemisphere seemed to suggest colonial empires were on the way out. A series of revolutions overturned Spanish colonial rule from Mexico to Argentina. There was a widespread feeling in Europe that colonies were more trouble than they were worth and the sooner or later colonies would revolt and fight for independence. Between 1775 and 1875, owing to all the successful revolutions in North America and Latin America, Europeans lost more territory than they acquired. **(Spielvogel, p. 859)**

But, rather suddenly, at the beginning of the 1870s, the British, French, and German popular attitudes towards colonies changed radically. The British Tory Party under Benjamin Disraeli adopted an imperialist platform and the “Little Englanders”—as critics of the empire called themselves, lost both parliamentary seats and popular influence. In 1876 Disraeli persuaded parliament to bestow the title of “Empress of India” upon Queen Victoria. The Queen appeared in public for the first time in 15 years adorned in huge, uncut jewels from India. The British Crown and the empire were tied together in a great outburst of enthusiasm for the British Empire. For two generations of British subjects, India became “the Jewell in the Crown.” India became a symbol of exotic climes, healthy and profitable adventure, and British Imperial greatness. Authors like **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** and **Rudyard Kipling (1865 - 1936)** began to write popular tales of adventures on the frontier: *Gunga Din*

Now in India's sunny clime,
 Where I used to spend my time
 A-servin' of 'Er Majesty the Queen.
 Of all them blackfaced crew
 The finest man I knew
 Was our regimental bhisti, Gunga Din.

So I'll meet him later on
 At the place where 'e is gone --
 Where it's always double drill and no canteen
 'E'll be squatin' on the coals
 Givin' drink to poor damned souls,
 An' I'll get a swig in Hell from Gunga Din!

Though I've belted you and flayed you,
 By the livin' Gawd that made you,
 Your a better man than I am Gunga-Din!

The popularity of imperialism was simply one superficial explanation for a remarkable process of colonial expansion. In the year 1800, Europeans controlled or occupied 35% of the land surface of the globe; by 1878 this figure had risen to 67% and by 1914 to over 84%. Between 1870 and 1900 alone, about 1/4 of the land surface of the world was divided up among the colonial powers of Europe.

Two questions come to mind: How was all this possible? And most of all, Why?

The "How" part of the question is easy enough to answer. Europeans enjoyed a decisive technological and military advantage. Many famous colonial fights were literally battles matching 12th century weaponry against the most modern weaponry that European science could produce: rifled percussion muskets, later on, breech loading repeaters, Gatling guns, maxim machine guns and powerful field artillery. Indigenous peoples, be they Sioux at Wounded Knee, Zulus at Rourke's drift, or Sudanese Dervishes at Omdurman stood no chance against vastly superior firepower. Even vast spaces and the interior of the American or African continents gave little shelter since European armies built their railways as they came or relied on steam-powered riverboats with light, cannon to push their way up the Yangste, or the Congo, or the Nile. In 1842, one British steamboat, the H.M.S. Nemesis sank most of the Naval forces of the Emperor of China in one afternoon. Only extremely warlike peoples like the Afghanis or the Ethiopians, sheltered among their inhospitable hills blunted the drive of Western imperialists. The Ethiopians defeated a large army of Italians at Adowa in 1895, and neither the British during the 1880s nor the Soviets during the 1980s, had much luck in subduing the Afghans. As for the United States today, who knows?

Perhaps the greatest display of western military superiority came in the Egyptian Sudan, at the battle of Omdurman (1898) when in one morning the Maxims and Lee-

Enfield rifles of Lord Kitchener's army killed 11,000 dervishes for the loss of 48 of their own British regulars. Young Winston Churchill was there and participated in the last successful Cavalry charge in British history. Battles like Omdurman demonstrated that the West enjoyed a military superiority equivalent to the productive and economic domination their factories and technology gave them. The global dominance of the West, implicit since the days of Christopher Columbus now knew few limits. Great Britain ruled India and fought several border wars in Pakistan and Afghanistan with a few volunteer regiments—a force of only 75,000 European troops. Between 1870 and 1914, the best defense native people enjoyed against European military superiority was the limited protection of very inhospitable climates and the susceptibility of Europeans to tropical diseases like Yellow Fever and Malaria.

The “Why” question is far more difficult to answer.

Economic Theories of Imperialism: Hobson and Lenin

A famous British economist, J. A. Hobson—and following him, Lenin, attributed the colonial expansions of these years to special new economic forces at work in the most industrialized nations of western and central Europe. This economic explanation of the urge to imperialism is usually taken to mean that the basic motives were also the basest motives and that, whatever political, religious, or more idealistic excuses might be made, the real impulse was always one of capitalistic greed for raw materials, advantageous markets, good investments, and fresh fields of exploitation. The argument, in brief, is that what Hobson called “the economic taproot of imperialism” was excessive capital in search of investment, and that this excessive capital came from over saving made possible by the unequal distribution of wealth. The remedy, he maintained, was internal social reform and a more equal distribution of wealth. *“If the consuming public in this country raised its standard of consumption to keep pace with every rise of productive powers, there could be no excess of goods or capital clamorous to use imperialism in order to find markets.”* It is undeniable that the search for lucrative yet secure overseas investment played a part in the European urge to acquire colonies at the end of the nineteenth century.

Lenin and “Capitalist Imperialism”

The followers of Karl Marx were especially eager to prove that imperialism was economically motivated because they associated imperialism with the ultimate demise of capitalism. **V.I. Lenin (1870- 1924)** elaborated the argument, in his famous pamphlet “Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism” (1916). According to Lenin, as the capitalist system concentrates wealth in fewer and fewer hands, the possibility for investment at home is exhausted, and capitalists have no choice but to invest abroad, establish colonies, and exploit small, weak nations. In the backward colonial peoples, argued Lenin, capitalism had found a new proletariat to exploit; and from the enhanced profits of such imperialism it was able to bribe at least the more skilled workers at home into renouncing revolutionary fervor and collaborating with the bourgeoisie. There could be no cure for imperialism aside from the destruction of capitalism. At the same time, the destruction of

colonial empires must be intimately involved with the great, inevitable revolution against capitalism itself. Cecil Rhodes, the founder of the Rhodes scholarships and a leading British imperialist, seemingly agreeing with Lenin, argued that colonies helped to ensure social peace and prevented socialist revolution at home by taking the minds of the working class off their misery: *“He who would avoid civil war must be an imperialist.”*

Great Power Rivalries and Navalism

Today, few historians or economists take the simplifications of Lenin very seriously. For one thing, colonies were not a major source of investment. The British, the foremost colonizers of all, invested far more capital in North America, South America and Australia rather than in Africa, India or China. Many colonies acquired were economically useless—British New Guinea or the German Cameroons offered little economic incentive to European countries. It was not so much a matter of investment following annexation as the other way around. The Germans invested far more money in Latin American than in their own African colonies. This is not that there no economic advantages from colonies. The British got gold, copper, and rare minerals from South Africa. The Belgians made efforts to exploit the mineral resources of the Congo, but there is no denying the fact that most of the new colonies cost more than they returned to the mother country.

There is a better explanation for 19th century Imperialism that still has its roots in the world economic structure. This explanation stresses the importance of the unification of Germany in 1870 and the emergence of the new German Reich as a major economic and military factor. During the late 19th century tensions between the great powers of Europe increased; more to the point, there was a military component to all this in the form of a military and naval arms race. It became more convenient to play out the European rivalries in the colonial sphere than at home in the form of open warfare. At the same time, as war in Europe began to seem more likely, all governments became more interested in dominating strategic territories and favorable locations for military and naval bases. Suddenly the Cape of Africa and the coastal cities of China seemed to be of enormous strategic significance. The British government in particular began to see the British Empire more in terms of a possible strategic asset in case of war. Colonial outposts like Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and Hong Kong all become more important as military and naval bases than as symbols of empire. They were now vital as links in the strategic lifeline to India. In short, European nations acquired colonies for reason of national security, because empire was very popular with the voters, and because governments came to see colonies as necessary to great power status.

Nationalist intellectuals in all European powers argued that national greatness meant seizing colonial territory. Once the scramble for colonies began, failure to enter the race was perceived as a sign of weakness, totally unacceptable to an aspiring great power. Imperialists like Joseph Chamberlain in Britain, Conservative Party Colonial Secretary, argued that the empire also provided a training ground for new leaders and a great economic unit should a collision with Germany come. The German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, for example, maintained that *“all great nations in the fullness of their strength have desired to set their mark upon barbarian land and those who fail to participate in*

this rivalry will play a pitiable role in time to come.” (Spielvogel, p. 859) The French political scientist Paul Leroy Beaulieu justified French expansion in Africa because:

Colonies are a matter of life or death for France: either France will become a great African power or in a century or two she will be no more than a secondary European power and will count for as much in the world as Greece or Rumania.

For all these reasons, by the end of the 19th century colonialism like nationalism developed into a mass cult. Colonies were symbols of national greatness and nationalists of every economic class were proud of them.

The very symbol of imperialism was the modern, armored, steam-powered warship. If a great power by definition, possessed colonies, she protected those colonies by building a modern fleet. Great Britain had always relied on her Royal Navy and by the 1890s many countries decided to follow the British example and invest in a fleet of steel battleships. In the new German Empire, in particular, the new German Emperor **William II (1869-1941)** envied British world power, which he believed rested on her navy. He determined that Germany must have its fleet as well:

Germany is a young and growing Empire. She has a world-wide commerce to which the legitimate ambition of patriotic Germans refuses to assign any bounds. Germany must have a powerful fleet to protect that commerce and her interests in even the most distant seas. Only those powers which have great navies will be listened to with respect, when the future of Pacific comes to be solved; and if for that reason only, Germany must have a powerful fleet. (**Daily Telegraph Affair, 10/28/1908**)

Political, Religious, and Cultural Justifications

Of course Europeans generally preferred to invoke other justifications for empire. Most argued that colonialism benefited indigenous peoples by bringing them the benefits of higher civilization. King Leopold of Belgium rushed enthusiastically into the race for territory in Central Africa: *“To open to civilization the only part of the globe where it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which envelops whole populations, is a Crusade worthy of this century of progress.”* (Spielvogel, p. 863) President McKinley justified intervention in the revolt of the Philippines against Spain because, “We must help our little brown brothers.” The story goes that the President then had to have someone help him find the Philippine islands on the Oval Office globe. Some imperialist took a more religious-humanitarian approach to empire. They argued that Europeans (and Americans) had a Christian and moral responsibility to educated ignorant peoples into higher culture and Christianity. To many Europeans and Americans, the prospect of saving souls seemed as important as the prospect of expanding prestige and profit. The humanitarian argument found its classic expression in Kipling's famous poem, ***The White Man's Burden:***

Take up the White Man's Burden,
 Send forth the best ye breed.
 Go bind your sons to exile,
 To serve your captive's needs;
 To wait in heavy harness,
 On fluttered folk and wild,
 Your new-caught sullen peoples,
 Half –devil and half –child.

If Kipling's idealistic view of British Imperialism is obvious, so too is his arrogant assumption of White supremacy.

Imperialism and Social Darwinism

Imperialism was also tied to the growth of racist and Social Darwinist thought. Social Darwinists believed that in the struggle between races and nations, the fittest are victorious and survive. Superior races must inevitably dominate inferior races by military force to show how strong and virile they are. As one British academic put it in 1900: *"The path of progress is strewn with the wrecks of nations; traces everywhere to be seen of the [slaughtered remains] of inferior races Yet these dead people are, in very truth, the stepping stones on which mankind has arisen to the higher intellectual and deeper emotional life of today."* (Spielvogel, p. 859) Another English imperialist was equally blunt: *"To the development of the White Man, the Black Man and the Yellow must ever remain inferior."* (Spielvogel, p. 859) Europeans of all imperialist nations readily accepted the racist notion of the superiority of the Christian west; German imperialists spoke of the greatness of German **Kultur** while French colonialists discussed the "French civilizing Mission." Many felt that missionary activity alone was a sufficient justification in itself. In India, the sons of Brahmin families were taught British history and Shakespeare but forbidden membership in White society. One textbook written to educate Vietnamese children in French history began with these words: "Our ancestors, the Gauls, were a fair-haired race."

To return to our opening argument, there were more than a few material benefits for the colonial peoples. It was the British Navy that abolished the international slave trade. This alone might be considered justification enough for the British Empire by many evangelicals at home. There were other benefits too. For example, European medicine cured or at least controlled ancient epidemic diseases like Yellow Fever. On the other hand, such medical interventions also upset the delicate environmental demographic balance and contributed to a global population explosion that is still underway. Europeans built railways and modernized harbor facilities. Colonial peoples received European style educations and a lucky few even entered Oxford and Cambridge or the Sorbonne. A lot of impressive buildings were erected to house European governors and the bureaucrats who administered the colonies. Naval bases, military bases, coaling stations and mining towns appeared in the jungles of the Congo. Cities like Saigon and Cairo acquired broad European style avenues and impressive restaurants, opera houses and department stores. Nevertheless, the belief that the superiority of their civilization obligated them to impose

modern industry, cities and new medicines on supposedly primitive peoples was another form of racism.

The British and Egypt: The Classic Pattern

The classic pattern of European intervention can be illustrated by the experience of Egypt during the 1870s and 1880s. French and British banks made several large scale loans to the ruler of Egypt, the Khedive. The French formed a company under the control of the engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps to dig the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and the Red Seas. Whether in the form of loans to the local ruler or in the form of investments, large amounts of British and French capital began pouring into Egypt. The Khedive, eager to impress everyone with his progressive plans, built the world's largest opera house in Cairo and hired the great Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi to write and produce a new opera, *Aida*. At the same time, British capital flowed into the Egyptian countryside to encourage the production of raw cotton to replace the cotton produced by the plantations of the American South recently shut down by the Union forces in the American Civil War.

Within a few years, inevitably, Egypt fell behind in its repayment schedule to French and British banks. The consortium building the Suez Canal went bankrupt and the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli arranged a massive loan to buy the Suez Canal out from under the French government. Disraeli's scheme worked and the British acquired the Suez Canal. "You have it Ma'am," he reported to Queen Victoria at Windsor palace. At the same time, also inevitably, the British financial community exerted pressure on Parliament to protect British interests even to the point of military intervention.

Faced with these kinds of political pressures, and with the press for a more forceful policy, all British governments, conservative and liberal alike, often gave way and authorized ever more intrusive interventions in Egypt. In 1876 a British Naval Squadron bombarded Alexandria and landed Royal Marines although the British did not remove the Khedive. In fact, local rulers were part of the imperialist system. The British navy and civilian administrators thus ensured repayment to British banks by seizing one half the customs revenues of the Egyptian government.

To protect their legitimate "interests," the British sent ever more administrators, soldiers and engineers to Egypt. Every step along the way British politicians did so reluctantly, but they did it anyway until matters reached the point where the British government controlled the economy of Egypt more thoroughly than that of Canada or Australia. In this way, gradually but inexorably, Egypt lost its independence. This scenario, economic penetration followed by gunboat diplomacy, was followed in dozens of countries in the Third World. In the words of one of my old professors, from Dublin to Calcutta, the world is full of people who do not mourn the passing of the British Empire.
(T.A. Brady, Jr.)